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Listen To An Unearthed Martin Luther King Jr. Recording You've Never Heard

Recorded on February 6, 1964, at The New School in New York, the great leader's words still resonate deeply today.

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BY MILES KOHRMAN
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Editor's Note: *In honor of Martin Luther King Day we are republishing this article about a unearthed recording of Martin Luther King from 1964 at New York City's The New School*

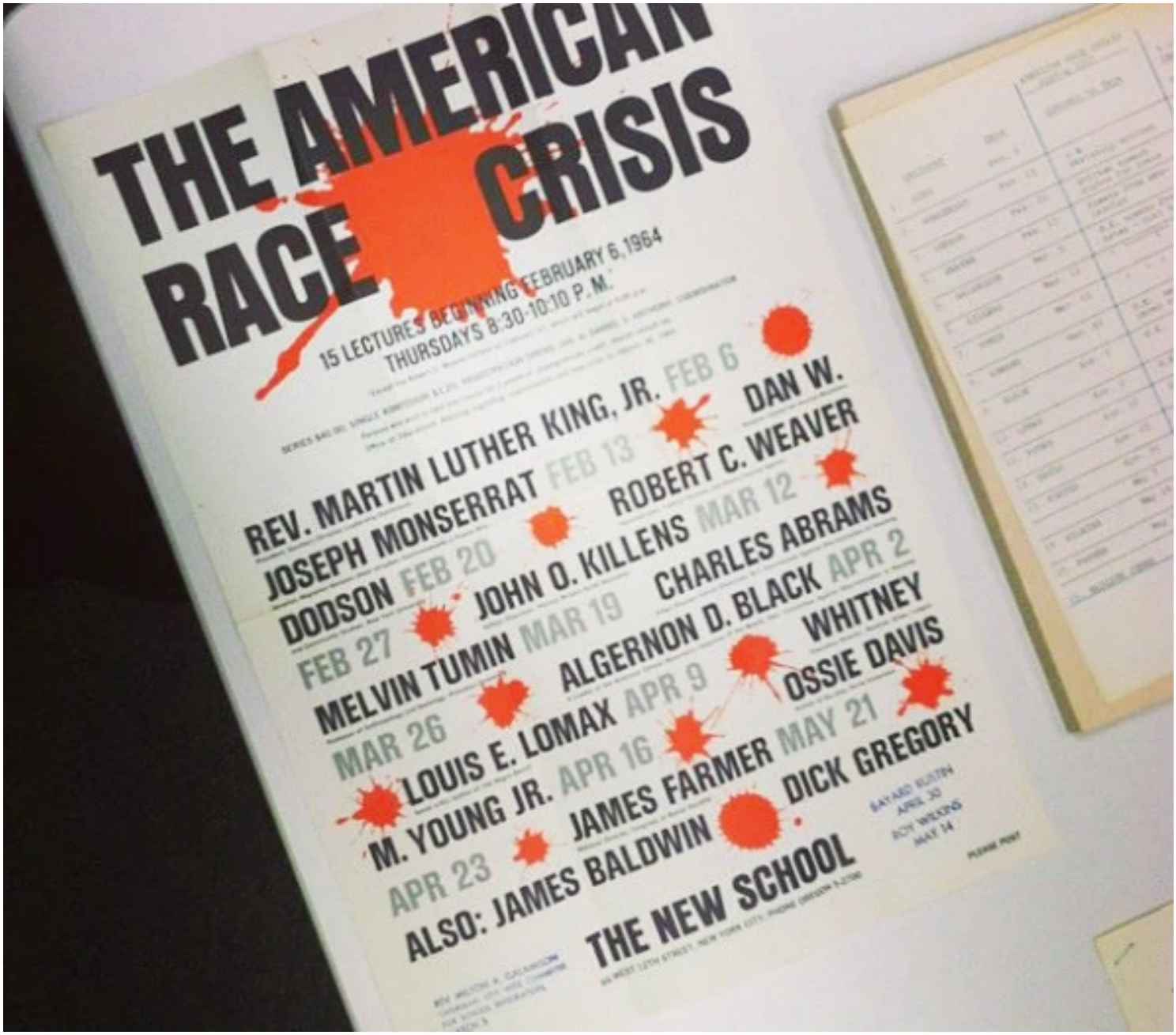
Today marks the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s, fabled "I Have a Dream" speech.

You'll hear references to that famous speech–and the speech itself–all over today. What you won't hear is a recording that's mostly fallen through the cracks: a virtually unknown audio recording of King that has reemerged after nearly 50 years. We talk a lot about leadership, but this recording of King speaking off the cuff reminds us that the word is barely big enough to describe King's contribution.

Oops, we couldn't find that track.

Privacy policy

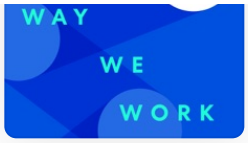
On February 6, 1964, King took the stage at The New School for Social Research, tucked away in Lower Manhattan's Greenwich Village. After delivering his prepared remarks, King paused to answer a few questions from the audience. In response to a query as to why the civil rights movement had seen a "bog down" since the celebrated March on Washington, he offered a lighthearted piece of advice.



The poster for the event where King spoke in 1964.

“After a whole season of demonstrations, you just get a little tired, and you need some rest.”

It had been a busy year for King, and for America. Less than six months earlier, the march had etched its place in the history books, quickly followed by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. His appearance at The New School would be no different: Just four days after taking the stage, the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 would pass through the House of Representatives.



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His appearance also marked the start of The New School's American Race Crisis lecture series.

The series took place over four months in 1964 and featured 15 luminaries of the American civil rights movement. Among them, Bayard Rustin, Chief Organizer of the 1963 March on Washington; Roy Wilkins, Executive Director, NAACP; James Farmer, Director, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE); Charles Abrams, urbanist; Robert C. Weaver, United States Secretary of Housing and Urban Development; Whitney Young, Executive Director, National Urban League; and John O. Killens, Chairman, Harlem Writers Guild Workshop.

But in time the talks were forgotten, and the reel-to-reel recordings, press materials, and behind-the-scenes documents found themselves hidden in the inventories of The New School's libraries.

In a turn of fate, hints of King's appearance reemerged in 2011 when a graduate student stumbled on a photo of the civil rights leader that seemed out of place, as reported by The New School's student newspaper, *The New School Free Press*.

> Then New School for Social Research doctoral candidate Chris Crews started to do research for a presentation on the politics of desegregation in New York City in the 1960's, he found a press release from The New School's communication and external affairs office–the kind most students look over and discard. A photograph caught Crews's eye, a speaker at the podium in the university's distinctive Tishman Auditorium.
>
> "That sure as hell looks like Dr. King," Crews remembers thinking.
>
> It was the start of a yearlong effort involving individuals and resources from across the school. In late summer of 2011, Carmen Hendershott, a university librarian, located old copies of the New School Bulletin, an alumni newsletter, confirming King's appearance at the school.
>
> But traces of the talks had seemingly vanished.

Soon, more tapes were found along with boxes full of documents surrounding the organization of the series. Thanks to the efforts of The New School Archives and Special Collections, many of these materials have been digitized and are now available for the public to view.

The tape labeled "MLK part 2," contains the final 15 minutes of King's question and answer session at The New School. While short, it's an intimate–and unique–experience with the civil rights leader: A recent article about the tapes in *The New York Times* described King as "thinking on his feet."

After speaking to Lyndon B. Johnson and the ongoing negotiations surrounding the Civil Rights Act, King is asked whether the black Muslim movement can make a positive contribution to society.

"It may frighten some people enough to cause them to see that we'd better hurry up and get this problem solved," he says, again throwing the audience into laughter.

"They think of me as a pretty bad fella' down in Georgia and Alabama and Mississippi, and say a lot of bad things about me. But even I have become a little more respectable when they discovered some of the ideals of the Muslim movement."

In response to a question from the moderator, King speaks of "preferential treatment of the Negro," to which *The New School Free Press* spoke with David Levering Lewis, a NYU professor and two-time Pulitzer Prize winning historian, for his perspective.

> King gave a lengthy defense of what is now called affirmative action, invoking a conversation he had with then-Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru about the efforts of the Indian state to ameliorate the suffering of the Untouchables, the lowest members of the Indian caste system.
>
> Lewis said the question catches King–and the movement–in a moment of transformation.
>
> "When the demands turn from seating at lunch counters and towards economic empowerment, that sort of thing, [the movement] is going to be less supported by people across the nation," he said. "We know that King is moving in the direction that will and does in fact radicalize a vast portion of the Civil Rights movement."

To compliment the exhibit, three nights of public programming surrounding the materials will be presented in partnership with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at The New York Public Library.

[*Photo Mash by Joel Arbaje for Fast Company*]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Former Editorial Assistant Miles Kohrman helped run Fast Company's homepage and completed miscellaneous tasks around the newsroom. He is a 2013 graduate of The New School. More

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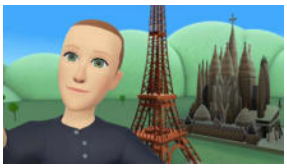

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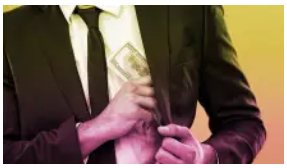

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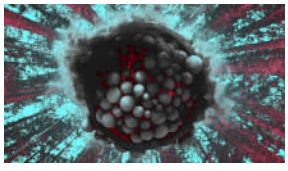

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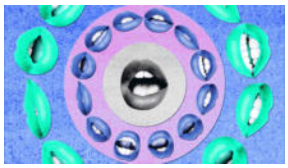

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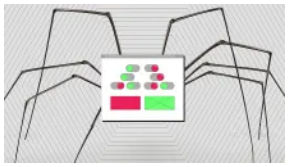

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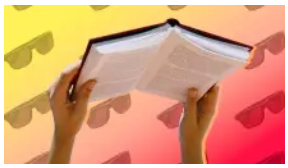

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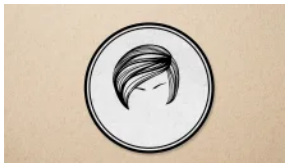

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